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An Inside Look into Downtown San Diego's Homeless Encampments and Safe Sleeping Sites

The homeless of Downtown San Diego have mixed opinions about the process of encampment removal and Safe Sleeping Sites.

[SAN DIEGO, CA, JUNE 26, 2025]

Downtown San Diego has a significant population of unhoused individuals, many of whom live in tents set up around freeway entrances and exits. In response, the City of San Diego has performed encampment outreach and removal to clean up public land and relocate unhoused individuals into available shelter. The City's intentions are to preserve public health and safety, however members of the unhoused community have been critical of encampment removal proceedings and especially condemn the quality and conditions of shelters colloquially known as "Tent Cities".

The City of San Diego enacted the Unsafe Camping Ordinance in June 2023; this law entails a multifaceted approach for encampment removal, starting with outreach in which workers from [non-profit organizations](#) and the San Diego Police Department's Neighborhood Policing Division offer available shelter resources and referral programs. While continuing to offer resources, the SDPD is supposed to perform "progressive enforcement", a 3-step model that requires officers to educate people about the ordinance and violation on first contact, enables the citation of misdemeanors on second contact, and permits custodial arrest in response to continued non-compliance.

While officers enforce the removal of campers, the City's Environment Service Department posts signage notifying residents of impending abatement and clean-up 24 hours in advance. The City claims the ESD stores valuable personal items for a minimum of 90 days and provides free delivery to any owner that contacts the department for reclamation. According to Matthew Hoffman, a city spokesperson, the abatement process intends to operate with compassion while mitigating public health and safety concerns by removing hazardous waste, debris, and trash which may include valuable personal items determined contaminated or perishable. Hoffman stated that, from July 2024 through April 2025, the ESD oversaw the abatement of 5,210 encampments removing 2,590 tons of trash.

Members of the unhoused community in Downtown San Diego have expressed frustration regarding the encampment sweeps and are disillusioned by certain shelter resources, government and non-profit leadership, and their relationship to society at large.

Kristina Coyne-Brink and Sarah Jeanne live in the same encampment off the I-5 in Eastside Village; when approached for an interview, they were welcoming and offered a cushioned seat in a gesture of hospitality. They recalled how encampment removal and abatement uprooted their lives on multiple occasions.

"I have to start over my whole life because the police have come in and basically stolen all my stuff. They said you can't touch your stuff or we'll arrest you and they laugh about it. More than 5 times all the things I've collected that I need to survive are thrown away and now I gotta pick through the trash,"

Coyne said.

They've been staying near the I-5 South entrance since the beginning of May and despite being moved four weeks ago, the difference is only about 100 feet. Coyne credited the current lack of abatements to their efforts keeping the space clean and devoid of potential hazards.

Since the California Department of Transportation owns all highways within the state, the California Highway Patrol has jurisdiction over freeways and therefore the encampments erected around freeway entrances and exits. Gavin Newsom amended [Senate Bill 569](#) in April requiring Caltrans to collaborate with city governments to remove encampments on state property. The bill requires "the department to establish a dedicated liaison to...facilitate communication with regard to addressing homeless encampments within the state highway system...in which both [local agencies and the department] work together to reduce and remove homeless encampments within the department's jurisdiction." Despite the bill, Jeanne asserted that since the SDPD's authority ends at city limits, the police haven't been present on their state highway encampment as of late.

"The SDPD tries to scare us away, but only the CHP can tell us to leave," Jeanne said.

Both women shared their feelings in regards to their place in society. Coyne said she endures judgment from people on the street which affects her self esteem. Jeanne said she would title the story of her life, "The Lost and Forgotten", to represent the isolation and ostracization she feels as a homeless person.

The City's ultimate goal of outreach is to connect people with services that will get them on the path to end their homelessness. Between 2024 and 2025, The Regional Task Force on Homelessness reported a [13.5% decrease in the city of San Diego's homeless population](#), going from 6,783 to 5,866 people.

Despite the encouraging statistics regarding housing, Jeanne and Coyne explained that in their experience many applications for permanent housing are rejected or ignored and not everyone gets the same treatment. Only two to three people they know were successfully housed.

"We're all in line [for housing] but who knows when that's going to be? I mean it's like a 10 year long waiting list," Jeanne said.

[People Assisting the Homeless](#), one notable non-profit organization that works in outreach, sheltering, and connecting clients with permanent housing has a mixed reputation according to [Google Review users](#) posting their personal testimonies online. 17 negative reviews reported lack of proper communication, favoritism for certain clients, mismanagement of funds, and alleged underhanded tactics for securing housing. Nine positive testimonies were mainly letters written to specific caseworkers praising their capability to assist in housing and other services.

One user, [Kyle](#), wrote "It looks like I'm not the only one who has had their expectations and opinions of the organization as a whole completely shattered by this particular office and its staff."

Another user, [Mary Jackson Jr.](#), wrote "I use to pray for the things I have now. Path is great because of people like Kat, Autmnm, Maria, Miguel."

In terms of PATH's interim housing facility on Sixth Avenue, Jeanne shared her personal experience as a prior resident:

"The whole building, for the most part, is SROs[Single Room Occupancy]. But they have two floors, one for homeless men, and then another floor for homeless women. And they actually have very good breakfast, very good lunches and dinners, um, you can shower and do your laundry whenever you want

to. And there are beds. They're not bunk beds. They're literally just a single one. And they're very useful. They're very nice...They have a library, they have a computer room. They have a closet, which you need to get clothes and stuff like that. [The workers] actually, really do give a f***...there's a day room, and they have books, you can charge in your room, even watch TV."

In stark contrast, Jeanne's evaluation of O Lot's Tent City, part of the [Safe Sleeping Program](#), was overwhelmingly negative. She became a resident of O Lot opening day on Oct. 23, 2023 but left 14 months later last December. It's located on the edge of Balboa Park adjacent to the Naval Medical Center, and currently has 581 tents along four tiers. Initiated by non-profits [Dreams for Change](#) and the [Downtown San Diego Partnership](#), they're responsible for providing meals, restrooms, showers, laundry, case management, basic needs assistance and resource referrals.

Jeanne was critical of the services being insufficient or unsanitary, including small food portions, lack of security, and rat infestations. Jeanne claimed in the first three months there were 10 fatal overdoses and four women were raped. She concluded that being on the streets is preferable to O Lot.

Dream of Change's first campsite known as B'Lot opened at 20th and B St in June 2023; it's currently home to Ray McDaniel McManus who lives in 1 of 186 tents. He echoed similar sentiments as Jeanne, stating there are unreported beatings and rapings, insufficient meals, site patrol sleeping or missing on the job, and rat infestation at both Safe Sleeping Sites.

They both questioned the workers' thoroughness in providing security and wellness checks, especially in light of numerous deaths within both campsites.

The San Diego County Medical Examiner confirmed in an autopsy report that Ralph Threatt, 65, died in his tent around Sept. 18, 2023 and wasn't discovered by workers at B'Lot for at least two days. They found his body in his tent on Sept. 20 after a foul aroma lingered for two days.

The City confirmed to [ABC10 News](#) and [NBC 7](#) that there had been three other deaths at both sleeping sites. [iNewSource](#) reported that a woman named Rita Chambers died at B'Lot on Jan. 12, 2024, along with two others on Feb. 5 & 8 a month later.

According to [a post on X](#) and the Safe Sleeping Sites residents interviewed, the latest death at B'Lot was Tamme Jackson who apparently passed away in her tent on June 6. McManus and a current O'Lot resident Preston Roland Simpson Jr. stated that Jackson had passed away in her sleep and blamed the lack of supervision or wellness checks. She was 37.

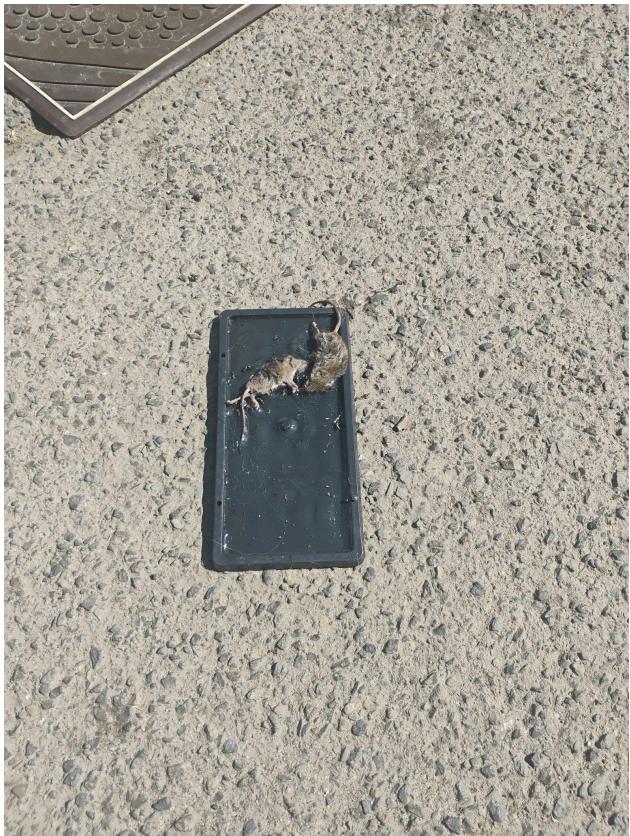
Tamme Jackson's story before moving into B'Lot was documented by [tales of the street sd](#) on July 9, 2023.

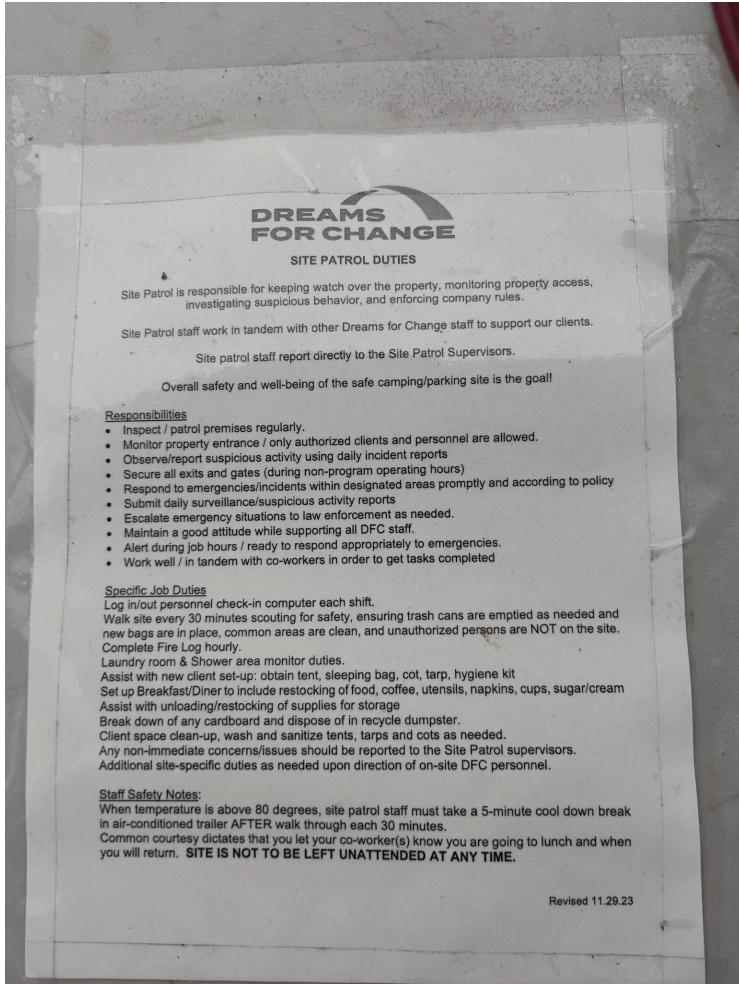
In terms of living conditions, Simpson shared photo and video of his direct experience occupying a tent on tier three. His footage ranges from March to June of this year, and it displays insect infestations inside his tent, overflowing trash cans, shower trailers with rusted interiors and missing showerheads, rats caught in glue traps, a large rat caught in a trap, breakfast and dinner items, flooding on the campground, and purported site patrol posts left unattended.

Around Oct. 2024, accusations of rats in the drinking water were denied by the City who noted the lack of photo evidence. Even still, according to ABC10 news, [more than 100 O'Lot residents signed a petition supporting the claim of rat contaminated drinking water](#). In the following photos, rats are undeniably present on the campsite regardless.

















The Safe Sleeping Program's mission is to relieve the immediate needs of the unhoused through shelter, amenities, and nutrition. However, the reports and documented evidence from residents indicate a deficiency in quality and equitability of service.